

"Thanksgiving and our Christian Heritage"



November 15, 2003

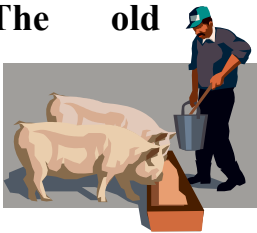
~Thanksgiving~

Since this month we celebrate "Thanksgiving Day" I was thinking about what we should be thankful for and how we should be thankful, as well as some of our Christian Heritage History. Thanksgiving Day should be everyday for the Christian as well as the non-Christian, we are to give thanks daily. The Lord has been truly good to us, we just need to set back and look at how He has and is blessing us today. Let's see what Psalm 100 verses 4 and 5 says about thanksgiving; *4 Enter His gates with thanksgiving And His courts with praise. Give thanks to Him, bless His name. 5 For the LORD is good; His loving kindness is everlasting And His faithfulness to all generations.* These two verses pretty well sum up thanksgiving. When we approach God we should always do it with thanksgiving, even as we start to pray and when we start out our morning. Beginning each morning with thanksgivings to God some way or another puts our heart right in the direction with God. We are to thank Him for what He has done; what He is going to do and for who HE is, for He is GOD. We are to be thankful in everything. Verse 5 says; *His loving kindness is everlasting and His faithfulness to all generations.* He is everlasting and faithful forever, even from the beginning of the world. The Psalms continue with 69:30; *I will praise the name of God with song And magnify Him with thanksgiving.* [PSALM 69:30] [NAS] and then we have Psalm 95:2; *Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.* [PSALM 95:2] [NAS] And then there is Psalm 92:1 and 2; *It is good to give thanks to the LORD And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; 2 To declare Your loving kindness in the morning And Your faithfulness by night.* As many of you may know Psalm 92 is a Psalm or a Song for the Sabbath day and in the

early days this psalm as well as many others were sung on the Sabbath. After reading the Psalmists instructions, it would be wise to ask ourselves. Do our lives truly express thankfulness to God? Or are we numbered among those that are living a life of ingratitude, failing to act like we understand who God really is and what He has done for us?

An old farmer once had an ungodly relative visit him. After the farmer had bowed his head and thanked God for the food they were about to eat, the relative rudely said, "What did you do that for? There is no God. We live in an age of enlightenment."

The old farmer smiled and said, "There is one on this farm who doesn't thank God before he eats." The relative sat up and said, "Who is this enlightened one?" To which the old farmer quietly replied, "MY FIG."



That seems to be the way we, and the secular world thinks. We take for granted everything that God gives us, even though we are one heartbeat away from eternity.



In the United States, the fourth Thursday of each November is Thanksgiving Day, a time set aside for remembrance and celebration of the rich blessings bestowed upon us by our Creator. One of the greatest of these blessings is religious freedom. During the Thanksgiving season, we often think back to the seventeenth century and the Pilgrims who came to New England in search for a place to worship freely. Today I would like to share with you some of our Christian Heritage of the seventeenth century and the ways that it played a part in establishing America with those Godly Christian values.



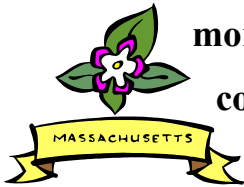
~Pilgrim's Story~



The Pilgrims left Plymouth, England on September 6, 1620, their destination The New World; America. Although filled with uncertainty and peril, it offered both civil and religious liberty. For over two months, the 102 passengers braved the harsh elements of a vast storm-

tossed sea. Finally, with firm purpose and a reliance on Divine Providence, the cry of “Land!” was heard. The ship was the “Mayflower” that sailed to the New World with Pilgrims and it was a large ship, its gross weight was about 180 tons.

The Pilgrims had originally intended to go to Virginia, where they would have been under the jurisdiction of the London Company, one of two English companies that had been chartered to colonize North America. But, due to being blown off course and navigational errors, the vessel rounded the end of Cape Cod on November 21, 1620,



more than 500 miles off course. They had no grant to settle in the region controlled by the Plymouth Company, the other colonizing English company. I don't know if there is any significant but this area is now called the New England States; they had left old England. They left Plymouth, England and established the Plymouth Colony.

Upon arrival of the Pilgrims from their sea journey; leader and later governor William Bradford wrote in his diary; “Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element.”

Some books say that the Pilgrims left Europe to “seek their fortune in the New World.” But Pilgrim leader William Bradford wrote in his diary that the voyage was motivated by “a great hope for advancing the kingdom of God.”

~Sabbatarians on the Mayflower~

Were there any Sabbatarians on the Mayflower which brought the Pilgrims to



America? We know that there were seventh day churches in England, most were probably underground and met secretly due the persecution that was going on at the time. J. N. Andrews wrote; “In the seventeenth century, eleven churches of Sabbatarians flourished in England, while

many scattered Sabbathkeepers were to be found in various parts of that kingdom.” Based on this information we know that Sabbath-Keepers in America can be traced to early colonial days. The evident seems to points to seventh-day Sabbath-Keepers coming to America on the Mayflower.

Hugh Sprague, editor of “The St. Joseph Gazette,” (Missouri) wrote in 1934 an editorial on this very matter, it is as follows:

“Strange as it may seem in the early history of America there was an attempt at suppression of the Christmas spirit. The stern Puritans at Plymouth, imbued with the rigorous fervor of the Old Testament, abhorred the celebration of the orthodox holidays. Their worship was on the Sabbath (Saturday), rather than Sunday, and Christmas in particular they considered a pagan celebration. Last immigrants attempted to observe Christmas as a time of joy, but were suppressed. Governor Bradford, Elder Brewster, Miles Standish and other leaders were firm against the Christmas spirit as we know it today.”

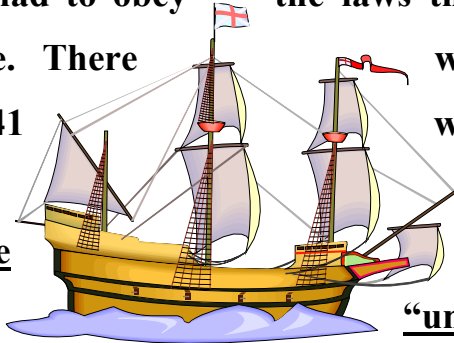
In a private conversation between Elder A. N. Dugger (Church of God (Seventh Day) and Hugh Sprague, Mr. Sprague stated that the Pilgrims were his direct ancestors and he knew their religious beliefs. He also stated that his grandparents and great-grandparents knew that they were Sabbath-Keepers on the Mayflower when it came over in 1620.



The early Sabbath-Keeping churches in America were composed of local groups, not organized or incorporated. (Seems to be the same today) Some of the names they went by were: Sabbatarians, Church of God, Church of Christ, Seventh Day Baptist, and even Independents. The Sabbatarians are so called, because they will not remove the Day of Rest from Saturday to Sunday.

~1620 Mayflower Compact~

Thus the pilgrims drew up the Mayflower Compact while the ship was still anchored in the New England harbor. All adult male passengers on the ship were required to sign it. Under this informal agreement or covenant, government was based on consent of the governed, an important precedent for the development of American democracy. All colonists had to obey the laws that were enacted. This compact established majority rule. There were 102 passengers on the Mayflower of which 41 were men that signed the “Mayflower Compact.” The Mayflower Compact starts out with “In the name of God,” and continues with saying that it was “undertaken for the Glory of God, and the advancement of the Christian Faith.” This, our Christian Heritage of God first.



Footnote: Peregrine White was the first European child born in New England and was delivered on the Mayflower while docked at sea waiting for shelter to be built on land.

~Seventeen Century Persecution~

One of the greatest of our blessings is religious freedom. As noted before we look back on the seventeenth century, the Pilgrims and the May Flower.



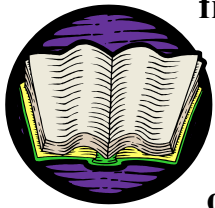
In the seventeenth century, people who adopted practices different from those of the Church of England were placed under close scrutiny and could be subjected to fines or imprisonment. For example, in the 1660s and 1670s, local churchwardens kept careful records of all “Nonconformists,” including anyone who worked or didn’t attend church on Sunday, refused to have infants baptized, or kept the seventh day Sabbath.

The government of Charles II hoped to bring greater peace and stability to the kingdom by enforcing religious uniformity. In 1662, it introduced the “Act of Uniformity,” which excluded from parish churches all ministers who would not conduct

services according to the Church of England's "Book of Common Prayer." The "Act of Uniformity" resulted in the ejection from many Nonconformist ministers who had gained their positions during the 1650s.

~Book of Common Prayer~

Charles I insisted that worship in England be conducted according to the "Book of Common Prayer" and no other. About two-thirds of its content today come directly from the Bible. The "Book of Common Prayer" contains the communion service, the daily offices (morning and evening prayer), the electionary, Psalms, and the services for special occasions and rites of passage like ordination, marriages and funerals. (I think the "Book of Common Prayer" is still used today since I saw an updated copy of 1979) It contains rites- (rights)- prescribed or customary form for conducting a religious ceremony.



~Act of Uniformity~

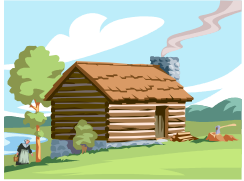
This was the mandated act that put some teeth into each church service obligating them to use the "Book of Common Prayer" for their worship and religious services. It was passed by parliament that had established this religious law. This was truly a mixing of Church and State. The State was making and enforcing religious laws. This is the reason that in the United States there is to be no mixture of Church and State. Church and Government are to be set apart in all ways, a broad separation. Even though this separation is starting to change in our society today, the government is beginning to take up religious issues, socially and in the courts.



In order to silence those ejected clergy, the government went on to institute the "Conventicle Act" (con-ven-ti-cle) in 1664. (A conventicle is a secret religious meeting as held in England and Scotland in the 16 and 17 centuries.) The "Conventicle Act" forbade any worship service not conducted according to the "Book of Common Prayer"

that involved more than five people in addition to the family of the house. Anyone caught violating this rule for the third time could be banished to the West Indies.

~Secret Worship Services~



Christians took several precautions to avoid being caught and arrested under the “Conventicle Act.” One account is that a congregation met on Saturday evenings at a roadside cottage in the county of Norfolk, England. John Woolstone who at the time lived four or five miles away at Walcott, would frequently arrive to conduct worship disguised as a drover and carrying a whip to avoid suspicion. The large, lower room of the cottage would be laid out as a dining room, and Woolstone would preach from a seat at the table, to a congregation assembled in the upper rooms. On other occasions, meetings were held in a barn at the rear of the cottage, and lookouts were posted at points to warn of the approach of informers. Many of the worshippers lived at a distance from the meeting place, and would travel home by various routes to avoid detection. It was a situation typical of many “Nonconformist” gatherings throughout the country at the time.

(Nonconformists were Worshippers that did not go by the “Common Book of Prayer”)

~Francis Bampfield Persecution~



Not all were able to escape persecution. For example, Francis Bampfield, an early leader among the English Church, was imprisoned for over ten years of his life. Bampfield prepared for the ministry by obtaining a B.A. and M.A. degrees at Oxford. He then served several congregations, becoming known for his “eloquence, his learning, and his pastoral concern.” During the 1650s he began to adopt Nonconformist beliefs, and he lost his position as vicar in Sherborne in 1662 under the “Act of Uniformity.” After that, he began to conduct services in his home, but he was soon arrested and spent much of the next decade in jail. While in jail, he conducted services

and he died in prison in 1684. His clear biblical command was from the Psalmist, Psalm 118:6; *“The LORD is for me; I will not fear; What can man do to me?”*

It appears that Sabbath-Keepers seventh day did not fit in with the “Book of Common Prayer” as laid out by the Church of England. So in coping with the Conventicle Act and other persecution, most Sabbath-Keepers were apparently accustomed to being scattered and an underground community.

With this kind of environment in England and Europe, Christians were looking for a place that they could freely worship God. The Christian Church wanted to worship according to Biblical Precepts, not according to government regulations and laws.

~First Century Standards~

Many inspired Christians wished to return the church to first-century standards. Christians holding these views were eventually called Puritans. Puritans insisted on the standard of sola scriptura, (scrip-turn-i) [only the Bible] while Queen Elizabeth and the church hierarchy gave equal (if not greater) weight to church tradition. Therefore one could not take a stand on Scripture’s place in faith without taking a political stand.

~Story of John Traske~

We have the story of John Traske who did not have a university education but was ordained in 1611. He was a traveling preacher who held to extreme Sunday Sabbatarianism. He had disciples throughout the country, including London. In 1615 the authorities arrested him as a wandering minister for going up and down streets and towns preaching.



Hamlet Jackson, one of Traske’s disciples, through his study of Scripture, became concerned that they were observing the wrong day. While traveling on a Saturday, Jackson was struck by a blinding light, an event he felt confirmed his views. Jackson then convinced Traske and his followers to begin to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Traske probably contributed to his persecution by insisting on Sunday work, the

observance of other Jewish festivals and by practicing the dietary restrictions in the book of Leviticus.



Traske was arrested in early 1618. The authorities charged him with making the people of God little better than Jews because he taught people to observe the Sabbath. He was whipped on his way to a pillory, to which he was nailed by an ear. While so restrained, he was branded with an I for Jew. (in those days Jew was spelled with an I, Iew)

From there he was whipped on his way to another pillory where his other ear was nailed. The court ordered him to pay the impossible fine of 1,000 pounds and then to be imprisoned for the rest of his life. In prison he recanted his beliefs and was released.

The severity of his punishment suggests the degree to which his views appeared to threaten the established order of the Church of England and the “Book of Common Prayer”.

Other members of Traske’s congregation were imprisoned, and two of them died in prison. Returne Hebdon died in 1625, becoming the first English seventh-day martyr. Traske’s wife, Dorothy, proved more enduring than he had. She died after living her last 25 years in prison, never wavering from her seventh-day belief. During that whole time, she refused the Leviticus prohibited foods offered her, surviving instead on bread, water, herbs and roots.

~The Execution of John James~

Charles II who was suspected of being a secret Catholic found a seventh-day Sabbatarian a convenient target for his wrath. The pastor of London’s seventh-day Mill Yard congregation was John James, a poor silk weaver by trade. His favorite scripture was Revelation 11:15, “*The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever*” (KJV). His persecution is one of the most thoroughly documented of that decade.

On the Sabbath of October 18, 1661, while preaching before his flock, the king’s officers dragged him from his pulpit. They accused him of treason, not of being a Jew

or keeping the Sabbath. This was a political trial, though it had clear religious overtones.

No credible evidence was submitted for the charges against him. Witnesses against him contradicted each other. Brave souls testified for him that they had heard the witnesses talk among themselves of how the state had bribed or threatened them into testifying. Others stepped forward on his behalf, denying he ever spoke treason. Still, he was found guilty. His sentence read:



John James, thou art to be carried from hence to the prison, and from thence to the place of execution and there be hanged by the neck, and being yet alive, thy bowels to be taken out (a fire having been prepared before hand) and to be burned before thy face. Thy head to be severed from thy body and thy body quartered, thy head and body to be disposed according to the king's pleasure. (W. E. Mellone, "Seventh-Day Christians," Jewish Quarterly Review [1898], 404-29)

The king's pleasure was to have James' head placed on a stake outside the congregation's meeting hall.

In speaking of his beliefs, he acknowledged that he was a baptized believer who accepted the principles in Hebrews 6:1-2 and such doctrines as faith in God, repentance from dead works, baptism, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment, ending with the affirmation that he owned the Commandments of God, the Ten Commandments as expressed in Exodus 20, and did not dare willingly to break the least of those to save his life. He also declared, "I do own the Lord's holy Sabbath, the seventh day of the week to be the Lord's Sabbath." (Sanford, 69)

Before being executed, James stated he was prepared to die, denied the charges and asked for God's mercy on the executioner. The hangman, who had not received the

expected brides to reduce James' agonies, had promised to multiply James' torments. But was so moved was the hangman by John James' speech that he mercifully waited until James died before drawing and quartering him. (pulled apart- in four directions)

~ Back to the Pilgrim's Story - 1621 First Thanksgiving ~

A prayer service was held before building hasty shelters to protect them from the winter cold since it was now December 11, 1620. Unprepared for the starvation and sickness of a harsh New England winter, nearly half died before spring. Yet, persevering in prayer, and assisted by helpful Indians, they reaped a bountiful harvest the following summer. The grateful Pilgrims then declared a three-day feast, which started on December 13, 1621, it was to thank God and to celebrate with their Indian friends. This



was America's first Thanksgiving Festival. Thanksgiving services had been held in Virginia as early as 1607 as well as other places in the New World; but not a Thanksgiving Festival.

~Biblical Feasts~

Thanksgiving Feasts are nothing new; they even go back to biblical times when



there were many festivals such as the "Feast of Booths" (ingathering), "Feast of the Harvest," usually in the fall of the year when harvest was gathered. All these feasts were giving praise and thanks to God.

~1676- First Thanksgiving Proclamation~

On June 20, 1676, the governing council of Charlestown, Massachusetts, held a meeting to determine how best to express thanks for the good fortune that had seen their community securely established. By majority vote, they instructed Edward Rawson, the clerk, to proclaim June 29, as a day of thanksgiving. Some of the words in this proclamation show the Christian



Heritage that governed the people at that time. The proclamation starts off with, "The

Holy God,” later has other words such as “if it be the Lord’s mercy.” And in the last paragraph it goes on to say “Thanksgiving and praise to God for such his Goodness and Favor. At the end the proclamation it even quotes Romans, “by the mercies of God we may all, even this whole people offer up our bodies and souls as a living and acceptable service unto God by Jesus Christ.”

~1789- George Washington Thanksgiving Proclamation~ (113 years later)



The 1789 Proclamation was issued by President George Washington, America celebrated its first Day of Thanksgiving to God under its new constitution. Most individual states had their own day of Thanksgiving, which was not on the same day, but usually in November.

This proclamation by George Washington also had the overtones of a strong Christian Heritage. The proclamation starts: Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and Whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me to “recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safely and happiness.”

Footnote of interest: Shortly after the Thanksgiving Proclamation was written, it was lost for 130 years. The original document was written in long hand by William Jackson, secretary to the President, and was then signed by George Washington. It was probably misplaced or mixed in with some private papers when the U.S. capital moved from New York to Washington, D. C. The original manuscript was not placed in the National Archives until 1921 when Dr. J. C. Fitzpatrick, assistant chief of the manuscripts division of the Library of Congress found the proclamation at an auction sale being held at an art gallery in New York. Dr. Fitzpatrick purchased the document for \$300.00 for the Library of Congress, in which it now resides. It was the first official presidential proclamation issued in the United States.

~1863 Lincoln Proclamation of Thanksgiving~187 yrs. after 1st Proclamation



Much of the credit for the adoption of an ANNUAL NATIONAL Thanksgiving Day may be attributed to Mrs. Sarah Hale. For thirty years, she promoted the idea of a national Thanksgiving Day, she contacted President after President until President Abraham Lincoln responded in 1863 by setting aside the last Thursday of November as a national day of Thanksgiving. Many southerners saw the new holiday as an attempt to impose northern customs on them, so it caught on gradually. The Lincoln Proclamation also mentions God, one paragraph reads; “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”

Footnote: Lincoln’s original 1863 Thanksgiving Proclamation came- spiritually speaking- at a pivotal point in his life. During the first week of July of that year the Battle of Gettysburg occurred, resulting in a loss of some 60,000 American lives. Four months later in November, Lincoln delivered his famous “Gettysburg Address.” It was while Lincoln was walking among the thousands of graves there at Gettysburg that he committed his life to Christ. As he explained to a friend: When I left Springfield to assume the Presidency, I asked the people to pray for me. I was not a Christian. When I buried my son, the severest trial of my life, I was not a Christian. But when I went to Gettysburg and saw the graves of thousands of our soldiers, I then and there consecrated myself to Christ.

~1939 U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt shifted Thanksgiving Day~



President Franklin Roosevelt shifted Thanksgiving Day one week earlier in order to extend the Christmas shopping season. It did not go over very well with the public and it was later changed back to fourth Thursday in November.

~1941 Congress permanently establishes fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day~

As we celebrate it today.

~Gratefulness~

There are those who want or remove any thought of God from our Thanksgiving celebrations. They desire to devalue the religious nature of our present Thanksgiving Holiday. This is unfortunate since Thanksgiving is one of the few holidays on the American calendar that is not swept away with commercialism or mixed with pagan elements.

Faith and thanksgiving are close friends. If you have faith in God, you will be thankful because you know His loving hand is upon you, even though you are in a lion's den.

Let us retain the original gratefulness and thankfulness to God displayed in the Pilgrims and many other founding fathers, as well as the concept of self-government, the hard-work ethic, self-reliant communities, and a devout Christian faith.

I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD.

[PSALM 116:17] [KJV]

Thank You



"I have gotten information for this article from a number of different sources; internet, Bibles, dictionaries, and study materials from several different authors, etc. I do not take credit for these writings since there are many. I did not keep up with this information in order to give proper credit. My comments and rewriting of the sources are in this article. I therefore cannot take full credit for this study. The full credit would have to go to Jesus Christ, the creator of all things.

Dewey E. Fox, Servant of our Lord Jesus Christ